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"Death in Halifax"

*From American Mercury for February, 1938
by Jack Gerster*

The greatest single man-made explosion ever to occur on this planet was on the morning of December 6, 1917. From the decks of the French munitions ship, "Mont Blanc," entering the seaport of Halifax, Nova Scotia, a flicker of blue flame appeared which went on serenely for seventeen minutes. A few seconds before, another ship, the "Imo," had struck the "Mont Blanc's" starboard side, and sailors from both ships had manned lifeboats and were rowing furiously towards the northern shore.

But before an alarm could be sounded the explosion came; 4000 tons of TNT detonated in a roar so great that no one who heard it could think of anything comparable to it. The Mont Blanc's 300 ton hull vanished; her 1000 pound anchor flew three miles; and from over the water death advanced. Seamen on the decks of other ships were squashed—and on land destruction was even greater. Of two hundred children in the classrooms of Halifax school, three lived. Scores of people in factories, homes, and on streets were crumpled in their tracks. A sailor, flung 1000 feet from the harbor, landed stripped of his clothes, but wearing his boots. A thousand fires started; and the ruined city was consumed.

Over 125 miles away the explosion was felt, and rescue parties were dispatched at once. The final death toll was 2000, 500 of whom vanished from the face of the earth.

Why did the blue flame flicker across the Mont Blanc deck? Through a mixup of signals in the narrow channel, the confused captain of the Imo swung his ship into the side of the Mont Blanc. The captain of the Mont Blanc steered his ship so that the Imo would hit his bow, and not the hold where the TNT lay; but the fatal crash overturned a drum of benzol, and the worst explosion in history followed.